

Government program debate as a «controlling function» of the Parliament

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As most of politicians and observers predicted, it has been announced recently that the parliament «took into account» the Cabinet of Ministers' program of action. The resolution on that matter, introduced by the parliamentary Committee for economic policy and approved by 259 votes, read that the parliament would return to the issue after the government drafted the 2003 budget and formally introduced it to the parliament. Hence, the new discussion of the government's program of action will not take place before autumn.

As it was predicted, the cautious formula allowed various political forces in the parliament to deal directly with the sensitive issue of possible dismissal of the Kinakh government. 259 votes in favor of postponing the possibility showed a new situational «majority» in the parliament. Though, the political context suggests that some of the 259 MPs may choose to change their mind when it comes to voting on the program again – and then the government may be at risk again.

Political ENTER

The issue of approval of the government's program of action is primarily a political, not an economic one. The economic indicators, included in the program, controversial as they are, have but a secondary significance as motivation to support the document. If the program is approved by the parliament, this government will be immune to dismissal for one year. Such an option will ensure for a while Anatoly Kinakh's position as the Prime Minister and conserve the relations between individual «centers of power» in the parliament and the Presidential Administration. It is not easy to answer the question to what extent the situation suits the interests and needs of influential power brokers in the parliament, the government and the presidential staff. Anatoly Kinakh has been seen as an unsteady compromise figure, his real powers having melted fast. The uncertainty is enhanced by the process of «divorce» of the «Yedyna Ukraina» megafaction. Though, when discussing the government's program of action in the parliament on July 5, Speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn suggested an opinion that seems to have originated at the Presidential Administration, no matter how much the power-brokers there may dislike Kinakh: «the MPs understand that the issue of dismissing the government should not be raised now» (<http://eng.for-ua.com>, July 5, 2002).

However, the issue of dismissing the government can be back on the agenda «tomorrow», i.e., at the next parliamentary session. That scenario may be realized if the parliament chooses not to approve the government's program of action. The government remains vulnerable no matter how the relations between the president and the power centers in the parliaments evolve. In the near future that vulnerability may be expressed in a new reshuffle of occupants of offices in the government building. The time framework of the process depends on how fast the key political players in the parliament manage to divide the positions in the government between themselves and come to terms with the president on that matter. The current political situation around procedural aspects of approving the program suggests that such negotiations are taking place.

Meanwhile, we can also observe conservation of various issues linked to the government's performance – from the fact that a number of MPs were very unhappy with the draft budget presented by the government to understanding that a return to the issue of forming a coalition government today would be in vain.

The domination of political factors in the process of discussing the government's program of action can be seen in the fact that formally the government does not necessarily have to have a program. The Kinakh government has been working without a program for a year. The government led by Valery Pustovoitenko lasted for almost 2.5 years (1997-1999) without any officially approved program. Due to the lack of mechanisms of political responsibility of the government in Ukraine the contents of a government program do not matter much and serves mainly as a note of indulgence for the government. For the whole period of Ukraine's independent statehood, there were only two government's programs of actions approved by the parliament: those of the governments of Pavlo Lazarenko and Victor Yushchenko. Pavlo Lazarenko government's program of action was approved by the parliament on October 15, 1996 (the parliament's resolution #412), but promises of «practical solution of the most acute economic and social problems of development of the state» referred to by the programs remained worth as much as the paper they were written on. The Yushchenko government's program «Reforms for Well-being» was approved by the parliament on April 17, 2000. The document emphasized priority of an individual as the top value in the state. The government's strategic goal was formulated as «development of human potential» and «reducing the level of poverty and multiplying the national wealth». When discussed at the parliament, the program was strongly criticized for being too declarative and vague. MPs proposed as many as 150 comments and amendments to the draft document while discussing it in committees, groups and factions. Apparently, this government's program will also face multiple critical remarks from MPs, enhanced by factors of political competition.

The Program

The Kinakh government's program of action was introduced to the parliament on June 7, 2002. The document was based on the Address of the President of Ukraine to the Parliament «Ukraine: Towards the XXI Century. Strategy of Economic and Social

Development for 2000 – 2004», the Strategy and the Program of Integration to the European Union, the Address of the President of Ukraine to the Parliament «Conceptual Foundations of the Strategy of Economic and Social Development of Ukraine for 2000 – 2011, «European Choice»; the Address of the President of Ukraine to the Parliament «On Domestic and International Situation of Ukraine in 2001».

The strategic goal of the Cabinet was identified as «reaching the European level of economic and social development and democracy by means of undertaking reforms and organizing productive work.» The document contains an impressively vast list of priority tasks around which the government's actions in 2002 are to be shaped. Among other things, the list includes improving the system of state governance, overcoming poverty and division of the population by levels of income; creation of due conditions for spiritual, cultural and educational development of individuals and improving their health standards, protection of motherhood and childhood, strengthening family ties; development of the labor market, «targeted» social security, pension reform, protection of property rights and development of private enterprise; development of the middle class, creation of conditions for bringing economic activity out of the shadow sector; ensuring protection of human rights and civil liberties, support for NGOs and social partnership; strengthening the rule of law; patriotic education of citizens; development of Ukraine's information environment and democratization of the media. As well as some other similarly broad «priorities». Generally speaking, the program represents an enumeration of almost all challenges faced by Ukraine and its government.

The Parliament's «Function of Control over the Government»

Although the direct execution of the «function of control» by the Ukrainian parliament has been delayed, some preliminary forecast as to votes «for» and «against» the government's program in the future can be made today. Given the amount of criticism from former colleagues of the former «Yedyna Ukraina» megafaction, the voting may not be in favor of the government, and the intrigue involving potential distribution of seats in the government may become pressing again. Meanwhile, the possibility of dismissing the government is discussed very accurately, as it is understood that the future of the government will be largely determined by the number of votes cast in favor of its program of action. The voting will demonstrate the real level of support for the government in the parliament and room for potential cooperation. So far the score was not in favor of the government – which, though, will not prevent it from staying for few more months.

Summing up the discussion of the government's program on July 5, Speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn announced that the government's program of action would be taken by the parliament into account, but that the parliament recommended to add more serious work to it. According to Lytvyn, there is a need to identify a few priorities and implement them, as «we will not be able to solve all problems» (<http://eng.for-ua.com>, July 5, 2002). It was stressed that the discussion of the program demonstrated that the parliament sought to perform the controlling function on the government and that «that function will continue to grow». Presumably, the peak of that growth may be resignation of the

government.

Currently there are 14 factions and groups in the parliament, and each of them has its own political and economic gravitation centers. The government's program was criticized by practically all forces of the parliament, though with different vigor and zeal. Given the total of 447 MPs, the supporters of the program are a minority. The softest position on the program was adopted by the SDPU (o) and successor factions of the «Yedyna Ukraina» (except the «Regions of Ukraine» that has its own reasons and ambitions to refuse support to the government). The largest faction of the parliament, the 110-strong Nasha Ukraina, seems to be the least optimistic about the program. One of its leaders, Yuri Kostenko, argued that «even initial analysis of the Kinakh government's program of action shows that neither the program nor, moreover, practical performance of the government meets political direction of the president's address, nor they provide for economic growth and improvement of living standards of citizens of Ukraine. That is why Nasha Ukraina suggests that it should be rejected» (<http://eng.for-ua.com>, July 5, 2002). Yuri Yekhanurov from Nasha Ukraina, formerly First Vice Prime Minister in the Yushchenko government argued that the program lacked coordination of macroeconomic indicators, forecasts of the monetary and credit policy of the National Bank of Ukraine and indicators of a number of investment programs. He went on to suggest that in future it would be wise to drop the practice of approving programs of action in its current form (www.ufs.kiev.ua, July 5, 2002). Head of the Budget Committee, a leading member of Nasha Ukraina Petro Poroshenko was also critical about the program and stressed that there were only two options: either the parliament approves the program or rejects it, and there is no option of sending it to the government for improvement.

Given the above and the previously expressed positions of the factions about the need of reshuffle in the Cabinet, one may expect that the faction will vote no to the government's program in autumn regardless of changes that may be made. Therefore, the question of political survival of the Kinakh government remains open.

The 21-strong Socialist faction is also not inclined to support the program. Before the program was first discussed by the parliament, leader of the Socialists Oleksandr Moroz announced his faction was not going to support it because it did not «contain specific positions that allow to speak about growth in the social and economic sphere». Therefore, said Moroz, «most probably, the SPU will not support the government's program of action».

Yulia Tymoshenko's BYT has similar intentions regarding the program. On July 5 the Ukrainska Pravda quoted a member of the BYT faction Mykhailo Pavlovsky who «called on MPs to reject the government's program» and suggested that Anatoly Kinakh should «start collaboration with the opposition in the Verkhovna Rada and prepare a new program based on earlier proposed documents on home and foreign policy of Ukraine». The BYT's proposals for collaboration with the government look more than utopian – even given the fact that opposition engaging in too close collaboration with the government stops being opposition. Meanwhile, BYT's 23 votes can be seen as potential votes against the government's program.

The Communists' position was expressed by Adam Martyniuk: «in September and October, when serious claims to the government, to the socio-economic situation may arise, absolutely different approaches may occur (Ukrainska Pravda, July 5, 2002). «If the program is not approved, I have no doubt that there will be forces in the parliament that may initiate the question of resignation [of the government], he said. When asked directly whether 63 Communist MPs would take part in that he said «Time will show». Given the constant criticism of the government by Communists, their vote in favor of the government's program would look as a sign of inconsistency – the only possible – though weak – argument would be that Kinakh may be substituted with some other bureaucrat, even less acceptable for Communists.

The factions that emerged from «Yedyna Ukraina» are generally negative about the program and criticize it as too declarative. Their moderate opponents seem to share a similar opinion. Most of them are likely to form their final opinion on the fate of the government as a result of the budget process and ability to agree among themselves on suitable substitutes to the key government officials.

Leader of the 17-strong People's Democratic party faction, Ukraine's former Prime Minister Valery Pustovoitenko argued that he had to admit that the program contained largely declarations and did not include specific measures to improve the social and economic situation in the country. Therefore, he argued that the program should be accepted as a basic draft and later improved and submitted again together with the draft budget (<http://eng.for-ua.com>, July 5, 2002).

A representative of the Donetsk lobby, the Regions of Ukraine, Valery Konovaliuk suggested that it had been premature to offer the program for review by the parliament, as the program itself was rather shallow. Therefore, he argued that the debate on the program should be postponed (Ukrainian Financial Server, July 5, 2002). The attitude of the Donetsk lobby to the government and its program will be largely dependent on the government's readiness to show flexibility and take into account the Donetsk interests in the budget process. If this will not happen, 36 members of the faction are likely to vote against the program.

Leader of the Agrarian faction Kateryna Vashchuk was quoted as saying that the program needed substantial additional work to be done and had to be approved «only together with the 2003 budget» (Ukrainian Financial Server, July 5, 2002). Hence, 16 more MPs are still undecided as to their support for the government.

Representatives of the 34-strong SDPU (o) faction show more tolerance – which probably can be explained in rather close relations between Anatoly Kinakh and the SDPU (o) leaders. For instance, member of the faction Mykhailo Papiyev, notwithstanding the criticism of «equivocal» provisions of the program, stated that «the government has proved with its practical work that the measures it has proposed deserve serious attention of the parliament. Therefore, there is a need for shared responsibility of the government and the parliament for further work. And this, by the way, is present in

the program» (<http://eng.for-ua.com>, July 5, 2002).

Quite possible, that 17 members of the Democratic Initiatives group led by Stepan Hawrysh will live up to their promise «not to make any steps against the government» (Ukrainska Pravda, July 5, 2002) until the draft budget is submitted to the government. Representatives of that group and the 38-strong faction of the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs and the Trudova Ukraina give the government some 5-6 months more, as Kinakh's deputy in the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs Mykola Onishchuk put it. Though, other members of the party are more skeptical. The document, proposed by the government «meets criteria of a program only by form but not by content,» said Serhiy Buriak.

Leader of the 17-strong Narodovladdya group Serhiy Osyka also stressed that the program had to be more realistic, but spoke against the dismissal of the government: «if we are trying all the time to produce a political crisis, we automatically build up the economic crisis,» he was quoted by the Ukrainska Pravda.

Anatoly Kinakh does not believe that the debates in the parliament on the government's program of action may end up with the resignation of his government. Although there is no obvious steady support from either the president or the parliament, the government stays – for now. The lifetime of the government will be determined by the budget process, interests of «centers of gravitation» within the parliament and their willingness to search for compromise. And, of course, Leonid Kuchma's decision. As the recent vote on approval of Oleksandr Piskun as the Attorney General of Ukraine has demonstrated, as much as 347 supportive votes can be collected to back an issue if substantial preparatory work has been done. The Kinakh government will last until the search for new compromises and balance of interests is complete. The government's program of action in this case appears to be a tester of the situation around the government.